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Elements students value in online courses

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Abstract—**This study aims to shed light on the student valued elements in online courses. Online courses have been said to struggle with quality and student retention related issues. By concentrating on student valued elements we hope to achieve higher perceived quality, better learning outcomes, and higher student retention what comes to attending online courses. The results of this study are based on a survey in which students were asked to choose between two online course related statements at a time, and students were also able to make own additions to the elements. Finally the ten most valued elements were separated from a bigger pool.**

Keywords- online education, student preferences, teacher expectations

I. INTRODUCTION

The objective of this study is to find elements that students appreciate in online courses in terms of quality and satisfaction. With the help of this study online course quality and student retention can be addressed more thoroughly. Students' satisfaction with online courses hopefully positively affects the perceived quality and retention. By focusing more effectively on the elements students value in online courses we hope to be able to design and implement online courses that produce better learning experiences and make students more committed towards completing the courses and becoming more active learners.

Various factors have been seen to have an effect on the link between satisfaction and perceived quality [1]. Satisfaction with the user interface has not been found to directly affect the perceived value [2,3], e.g. what comes to an online course shell or an eLearning environment, but the more customers are satisfied, the more they are loyal [4]. Whether this is a causal relationship or not is debatable [5,6,7]. Literature suggests that the perceived quality actually stems from satisfaction [8,9,10,11,12,13]. In our context this could mean that the more our students are satisfied with our online courses, the more loyal they are towards continuing to study in our higher education institution and the better they perceive the quality of our online courses.

II. METHOD

This survey was implemented with the help of an online tool. Students having online course experience were asked to access the site, which offered students ten rounds of voting between given statements and then they were offered an opportunity to add their own suggestion for a statement. After student's statement was added to the pool of earlier statements, this new statements was used just like other statements.

The respondents, higher education students, were presented two statements at a time, and they were supposed to choose the option they considered more important regarding participating in online courses. Students own statements were quite victorious as we can see from the results. Out of ten winning statements three were introduced by students, and seven were original statements. In the beginning the pool of statements included 25 suggestions.

III. POOL OF STATEMENTS

In an effort to identifying the online course quality dimensions, and the relationship between online learner satisfaction and perceived online course quality, several student feedback surveys concentrate on the similar dimensions as defined in SERVQUAL by Parasuraman et al. [14,15]:

- Tangibles: physical facilities, equipment and appearance of personnel.
- Reliability: ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately.
- Responsiveness: willingness to help customers and to provide prompt service.
- Assurance: knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to inspire trust and confidence.
- Empathy: caring, individualized attention, the service provider gives its customers.

The dimensions above were used as a basis for the pool of statements (Table 1).

TABLE I. POOL OF STATEMENTS

Category	Statement
Tangibles	Course's learning environment (Moodle, Optima, Blackboard, etc.) is up-to-date and modern.
	Students don't need to have the latest technology (laptops, tablets, software, etc.) to attend the course.
	Course assignments can be turned in different formats.
	Course materials can be used with older versions of applications, software, and hardware.
	Course learning materials are up-to-date.
Reliability	When having technology related problems, willing help is quickly available.

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Category	Statement
	Students can trust that their teacher tries his/her best in solving course related issues.
	Teacher has to work flexible hours when course related problems appear.
	Teacher replies to course related messages within 24 hours.
	If course related problems are not quickly solved, teacher has to be flexible regarding course related requirements.
Responsiveness	Teacher communicates clearly about student related expectations.
	Detailed course schedule on all course related activities is readily available.
	Students know when to expect teacher to reply to their messages.
	Students know when assignments are evaluated.
	Students know when to expect feedback to be available.
Assurance	Course teacher has a positive attitude towards students.
	Students feel that they can openly communicate with their teacher.
	Students can trust that messages exchanged with teacher remain confidential.
	Students can trust that their teacher has their best interest in his/her mind.
	Students can trust that all issues of private nature are handled with mutual respect.
Empathy	Students receive individual feedback on course assignments.
	Teacher understands that not all students are the same.
	Teacher allows the students to affect the way they attend the course.
	Students feel that teacher considers their personal life outside the course too.
	Students feel that they are not alone with course related issues.

IV. Results

All together 59 visits to the survey site were recorded and a total of 595 votes were cast. The highest ranking statements can be seen in Table 2. The winning statement (86%), introduced by a student, calls for flexibility regarding online course schedules. However, the statement does not imply total flexibility, instead it demands flexibility within reason.

If the core idea of the second-ranking statement (82%) is correctly interpreted, it says that students need to understand that the evaluation is personal, and students' contribution to course assignments affects their grading. On a general level this should be self-evident, but probably this partly reflects the teaching method used in the university of applied sciences in question.

The third ranking statement (75%) focuses on the importance of individual feedback on course assignments. When the number of students on an online course get higher and higher, this affects teachers' workload considerably. However, careful planning of evaluation and course activities can help in here.

According to the fourth ranking statement (70%) the timeliness of course learning materials is of high importance. This sets pressure on the need to update course learning materials like slides, videos, etc. Another approach could be e.g. to plan the course activities so that the assignments stand time and students are responsible for using up-to-date, current materials (written publications, articles, expert blogs) as a support in completing the course assignments.

The fifth ranking statement (68%) stresses the importance of having access to the latest publications, journals, etc., which is a financial matter of the educational institute. The wider the access to the latest scientific and other articles, the more expensive it gets. For students it's frustrating not to have access to interesting, current publications they could use to properly complete given course assignments.

The next statement (6th, 62%) focuses on teachers' integrity. Students have to be able to trust their teacher. The seventh ranking statement is also about communication. The eighth ranking statement focuses on teachers' readiness and commitment – students should be able to see that teachers really put effort on helping them. The ninth ranking statement call for commitment from teachers to be readily available to students. Teachers should reply to students' course related messages within reasonable time-window. The tenth ranking statement calls for careful planning and clear teacher presence. Students should have a connection with their peers and their teacher not to feel being alone with course related issues.

TABLE II. The highest rated statements

Rank / Original or student's statem.	Statement	Win rate %
1/Student	Simply put the most important part is a certain level of flexibility. Students take online courses due to the flexible schedule in them.	86
2/Student	Students understand that evaluation in online courses is personal and reflects students' individual performance.	82
3/Orig.	Students receive individual feedback on course assignments.	75
4/Orig.	Course learning materials are up-to-date.	70
5/Student	Students get deeper understanding of the course by doing more research hence the need to have access to more online resources e.g. articles.	68
6/Orig.	Students can trust that messages exchanged with teacher remain confidential.	62
7/Orig.	Students feel that they can openly	59

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	communicate with their teacher.	
8/Orig.	Students can trust that their teacher tries his/her best in solving course related issues.	59
9/Orig.	Teacher replies to course related messages within 24 hours.	59
10/Orig.	Students feel that they are not alone with course related issues.	57

A. *Limitations*

Students having participated in this study are members of Laurea University of Applied Sciences' student community. The students major in Security Management, Business Management, and Business Information Technology. The students were not presented with all the statements, which might affect the ranking to some extent. Students were able to vote ten times, so, in reality they were shown 20 statements from the pool. At the end the pool consisted of 38 statements.

V. DISCUSSION

Earlier research suggests that online courses can be as productive as traditional seated courses what comes to students' learning. Online students can perform better than traditional students. One big factor in this is the opportunity for students to interact with each other and with their teacher [16]. Need for open, trustable, and active communication with the teacher is reflected in our study in the third, sixth, seventh, ninth, and tenth statements. Students see communication being an important part of online courses.

In order for an online course to be successful literature implies that teachers/instructors need to offer versatile options for students to interact [17, 18, 19, 20, 21]. Our results don't directly reflect this requirement. However, if communication is supposed to be open, active, trustable, there has to be several ways to interact – student to student, and student to teacher and vice versa. This also helps teachers to establish strong presence on online courses, which is seen as a prerequisite to effective online instruction [17, 18, 19, 20, 21].

According to the literature, students need to feel connected to their peers on and their teacher on an online course [22, 23, 24]. When we take a look at the winning statements, only the tenth statements directly touches this requirement. Having been reported several times in the literature, we'd have expected to see this statement to rank higher. However, other statements, e.g. the seventh, eighth and ninth, still imply this same necessity.

Even though students want to have material readily available (the fifth statement), the need to be able to evaluate the quality of a source should be kept in mind as an important skill of a student. To have an access to current publications takes financial resources, since some of the most credible, notable (scientific) publications are not openly available.

According to the winning statement certain level of flexibility of the course schedule is seen as a focal part of online courses, and this being one of the drivers as students take online courses. This is definitively something that could be studied further. What kind of flexibility of an online course schedule best improves student retention, learning outcomes, and student satisfaction? This is a difficult question, since e.g. as an objective learning outcomes can contradict with student retention and satisfaction.

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